

The Mass Part 1: What we believe is what we pray and live

“Ite, Missa est.” This is the Latin ending of the Mass, rendered in English as: “The Mass is ended, go in peace.”

“OK,” you’re thinking, “here’s another article — or worse, a series of articles — on the pre-Vatican II Mass.”

Wrong. I know the old Latin Mass is a hot topic, but I start this column with the Latin words for two other reasons.

The first is to say that “missa” is where we get the English word “Mass.” Second, “Ite, Missa est” means we are “missioned” by Jesus Christ himself to bring the Good News to the world (Matthew 28:19-20). The dismissal more than just signals that we can go home — it tells us what to do after Mass.

The church uses the Latin phrase, “lex credendi, lex orandi” — “the law of believing is the law of praying” (“Catechism of the Catholic Church,” 1124). This means that if you want to know what we Catholics believe, look at how we pray, and vice versa.

Pope Benedict XVI’s exhortation, “The Sacrament of Charity,” follows that basic pattern: Part 1 is titled “A Mystery to Be Believed” (“lex credendi”). Part 2 is “A Mystery to Be Celebrated” (“lex orandi”).

But the pope adds a Part 3: “A Mystery to Be Lived.”

One might say Pope Benedict XVI expands the phrase to “lex credendi, lex orandi, lex vivendi” — the law of belief is the law of praying is the law of living.

Mass is about more than fancy words and strange vestments and vessels. It’s about changed lives: ours, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the lives of those we encounter.

For that reason, the popular “Gather” hymnal we use in church could also have been titled “Dismiss!” because we are charged to go out and bring Christ to a world that

needs him.

These articles on what happens at Mass mean nothing unless we are converted. ?But I'm ahead of myself. We'll discuss the dismissal in a few weeks. For now, let's start with a few other basic concepts for understanding Mass.

- **Time and space.** The incarnation, Passion and resurrection of Jesus are timeless. Though they happened historically and geographically in Palestine 2,000 years ago, their reality becomes present here and now in our celebration. "Remembering," in the strong liturgical sense, is how we become present to that always-and-everywhere reality (CCC, 1362-1363).

- **Signs and symbols.** Question: Is the Eucharist the real presence of Christ, or is it a symbol? Answer: Yes.

The Eucharist is both the real presence and a symbol, or better, a collection of symbols. We hesitate because "symbol" to us connotes something unreal, but that is not the traditional Catholic understanding. Every sacrament is a sign (CCC, 1123); the sign is the reality, present in a particular way.

To say the eucharistic presence is symbolic means Jesus Christ comes to us through bread and wine, which the Spirit changes into Christ's Body and Blood, and also through the Word, people, actions and even objects of the Mass (CCC, 1131).

- **Distinctive roles, words, actions and objects.** A few years ago, a college sports team met with President Bush, and people gasped because some women on the team wore flip-flop sandals. The reaction was reasonable because for really special events we dress up.

The Eucharist commemorates the most important event ever, and our words, actions and objects should dress it up. That's why the church protects worship from becoming too pedestrian. Not just anybody leads the Eucharist. We choose particular men and ordain them to do so. We don't use paper cups and plates, nor do we talk to God using words like, "Hey, Dude!" Something special is going on.

- **Full and active participation.** St. Pius X didn't want people to pray at Mass, he wanted them to pray the Mass. Pius XII encouraged full and active participation, a

phrase re-emphasized at Vatican II. The better we understand our special roles, words and actions, the better our worship.

During the next six weeks, we will look at each part of the Mass in succession so we can understand, celebrate and live it even better.

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